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Revisiting Meng Jiangnü

Once upon a time, in the early years of folklore studies, folklore was the lore of the folk, an elusive entity that was just about to disappear, and whose stories and songs, customs and beliefs had to be rescued by upper-class (or at least bourgeois) scholars, who by the magical skills of science would be able after careful selection and intensive rewriting to distill a pure, national essence from these materials. As more and more scholars took part in actual field research, the identity of the folk became less and less clear, as it turned out that every social group had its own, often unwritten lore. Viewed from this angle, the keynote speech is very much a genre of academic folklore: on the occasion of the gatherings of the tribe of professors and students, where everyone else will only have ten or twenty minutes to present his or her paper, we invite one or more elderly scholars to give one long speech at the very beginning. The origins of this custom are of course shrouded in mystery and subject of intensive speculation: perhaps the elders of our tribe honestly believed that in the humanities and social sciences scholars become more erudite with years; perhaps they realized only too well that elderly scholars frequently become more long-winded with the advance of age; perhaps they even thought it would provide a good opportunity for everyone else in the early morning to doze off and go back to sleep as one of the luminaries in the field surveyed the field—more often than not looking more backward than forward, and once again fighting the scholarly battles of yesteryear. At the same time of course, the elderly scholar chosen for this function would usually feel honored because his leading role was still recognized, and be very happy that his duties would be done very early on in the conference so he in his turn could go and doze off, sleeping through the rest of the conference, in blissful ignorance of the new developments in the field, hotly debated by younger scholars in their panels.

But as all students of folklore know, folklore only survives as long as it has a function: it is not only an honor to be invited to give a keynote speech, but also a challenge, and the challenge is even greater when the person who is invited to give the keynote speech can hardly claim to be a specialist in the field. To be a lover of fairy tales and folksongs does not necessarily make one an expert scholar in the field. Like many western scholars of Chinese literature, my teaching duties hardly allow for any high degree of specialization, and to the extent that I can claim to have a specialization, I have strayed into many other fields, including, I confess, folk literature. For example, a few years ago, for another

conference here in Taiwan, I even drew a parallel between the plot of Tang Xianzu's 湯顯祖 *Mudanting* 牡丹亭 (Peony Pavilion) and the plot of the fairy tale of Sleeping Beauty. If I dare claim some modest expertise in one small subfield of folk literature, it is because I have had, from the beginning of my career, an interest in the Chinese tradition of verse narrative and prosimetrical literature, or what in Chinese is called *shuochang wenxue* 說唱文學. In most general introductions to Chinese folk literature of the last few decades, the many performative genres and the rich body of texts that make up *shuochang wenxue*, are treated as part of folk literature, but the treatment tends to be brief and perfunctory, as if *shuochang wenxue* was the Cinderella of folk literature—as if it not really belonged to folk literature, but had to be treated under that heading because it was not treated as a part of “Chinese literature” either.¹ I will return to this topic at the very end of my talk, when I will argue—and of course I am not the first to do so—that it makes sense to make a distinction between “folk literature” or *minjian wenxue* 民間文學 and popular literature or *su wenxue* 俗文學. In the meantime, I can only repeat that I feel honored to be here, but that I also feel somewhat out of place.

Revisiting Meng Jiangnü

No topic lends itself better for a keynote speech at a conference on Chinese folk literature than the legend of Meng Jiangnü 孟姜女. No Chinese folktale can be traced so far back in time, and no Chinese folktale enjoyed such a wide-spread popularity throughout the empire and in all layers of society as this tale of the teenage widow, who had barely known her husband, but traveled to the construction site of the Great Wall when her husband had been drafted for corvée labor to bring him his winter clothes, only to discover that her husband had died from exertion and had been buried inside the body of the Wall, whereupon she brought down the Great Wall by her weeping and wailing. The study of legend of Meng Jiangnü has been central to the development of the modern discipline of folklore studies ever since Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛 in the twenties of preceding century published his learned articles on this folktale, tracing its ultimate origin back to the ancient *Zuozhuan* 左傳, and documenting its remarkable proliferation. Gu Jiegang's seminal studies have been reprinted in the early nineteen eighties,² and have been followed by even more detailed studies by eminent scholars such as Wang Qiugui 王秋桂, Yang Zhenliang 楊振良, Wu Ruishu 巫瑞書, and Huang Ruiqi 黃瑞旗. Scholars from Taiwan have made significant contributions in this respect, partly they because they had access to the rich holdings in popular literature materials in the Fu Ssu-nien Library

¹ While folklore scholars of the twenty-twenties and 'thirties focused very much on the collection of texts, scholars in the PRC quickly turned their attention to either oral traditions or the performative aspects of *shuochang wenxue*.

² Gu Jiegang, *Meng Jiangnü gushi yanjiu ji* 孟姜女故事延救集 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1984). For a survey of the study of the legend of Meng Jiangnü in the twenties and thirties, see Chang-tai Hung, *Going to the People: Chinese Intellectuals and Folk Literature, 1918-1937* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1985); for a more critical analysis of the categories used by Gu and his contemporaries and analyzing their materials, see Haiyan Lee, “Tears the Crumbled the Great Wall: The Archaeology of Feeling in the May Fourth Folklore Movement,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 64 no. 1 (2005): 35-65.

at the Academia Sinica. In view of the pre-eminent position of the legend of Meng Jiangnü in Chinese folk literature and its study, it comes as no surprise that this tale was selected as the first Chinese myth for a modern rewriting in the international project on “The Myth”, initiated by the Scottish publisher Cannongate. The Nanjing-based writer Su Tong 蘇童 was selected for this rewriting, and his novel *Binu* 碧奴 appeared in its Chinese version in 2006—an English translation by the veteran translator Howard Goldblatt appeared this year as *Binu and the Great Wall*.³

As anyone knows who ever has read anything by this writer, Su Tong has a very rich imagination, and his *Binu*, who weeps through every opening in her body, has very little to do with the traditional Meng Jiangnü in any of her many guises. Su Tong may not have wanted to adhere too strictly to any traditional version of Meng Jiangnü, but it also would not have been easy for him to find a version of the tale by simply going to a bookshop. During a recent visit to Shanghai bookshops I could find books like *Mingjia tan Meng Jiangnü* 名家談孟姜女 (Famous personalities discuss Meng Jiangnü),⁴ but not a single version of the story itself seemed to be in print, not even a *lianhuanhua* 連環畫 (comic book) version. Lu Gong’s 路工 compilation of traditional versions of the legend, entitled *Meng Jiangnü wanli xunfu ji* 孟姜女萬里尋夫集 (Meng Jiangnü travels for a myriad of miles to find her husband), first published in the fifties,⁵ was reissued in the early eighties in the PRC, but not in later years to the best of my knowledge. A collection of materials on the legend of Meng Jiangnü, including many recently collected and previously unpublished versions of the tale, was prepared for a Shanghai conference on Meng Jiangnü in 1985, but only published as an internal publication as *Meng Jiangnü ziliao xuanji* 孟姜女資料選集 (An anthology of materials on Meng Jiangnü).⁶ One may find numerous other versions of the legend in many more general publications on folksong, but a revised and expanded edition of Lu Gong’s compilation is long overdue. One wonders to what extent the absence of such a collection simply reflects a lack of demand for such materials on the part of the readings public. In the case of the story of Liang Shanbo 梁山伯 and Zhu Yingtai 祝英台, where we have seen the publication of large compilations of materials, the projects seems to have had close ties to the theme park industry, where different localities try to prove their exclusive link to a legend, so perhaps all that is needed is a “Meng Jiangnü theme park.” But one wonders to what degree this absence of Meng Jiangnü in bookstores may also be linked to the drastic change in symbolic value of the Great Wall and the First Emperor of the Qin in the course of the twentieth century. At the beginning of the twentieth century the Great Wall was a ruin, and if it was a tourist attraction, it was so only for foreigners, and the First Emperor of the Qin was a tyrant, so nobody took offense if all versions of the legend of Meng Jiangnü agreed in viewing the building of the Wall as an act of delusion, stupidity, or depravity. By the middle of the twentieth century both the Great Wall and the First Emperor had

³ Su Tong, *Binu* (Chongqing: Chongqing chubanshe, 2006); Su Tong, *Binu and the Great Wall* (Edinburgh: Cannongate, 2007).

⁴ Tao Wei 陶瑋, Ed., *Mingjia tan Meng Jiangnü* (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 2006).

⁵ Lu Gong, Comp., *Meng Jiangnü wanli xunfu ji* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1958).

⁶ *Meng Jiangnü ziliao xuanji*, Vol. 1, *Geyao* 歌謠, Compiled by the Shanghai Branch of the Chinese Society for the Study of Folk Literature, internal publication, 1985.

become symbols of Chinese nationalism, and in the later years of the Cultural Revolution the story of Meng Jiangnü was condemned as “a poisonous weed” precisely for attacking these two modern icons.⁷ The recent rise of nationalism in the PRC, and the explosive growth of internal and foreign tourism to the Great Wall and the Terracotta Army of the First Emperor have only enhanced the status of these two icons. The judgment on Meng Jiangnü has of course been reversed, but a Great Wall built out of the bodies of its construction workers may not be the most suitable symbol of a proud nation.

Old and New Translations

I personally became more interested in the story of Meng Jiangnü when I wanted to teach an undergraduate class on Chinese verse narrative and prosimetrical literature at Harvard. Undergraduate classes have to be based on English-language materials, and I soon discovered that while translations of early prosimetrical literature is relative plentiful, translations from the rich materials preserved from the Qing and later are very rare indeed. In the case of *bianwen* 變文 texts (“transformation texts”) from Dunhuang, we have both Arthur Waley’s pioneering selection of translations, and Victor Mair’s later, amply annotated selection of texts, which has been reissued in paperback this year, so is readily available once again. Both the *Liu Zhiyuan zhugongdiao* 劉智遠諸宮調 and the *Xixiangji zhugongdiao* 西廂記諸宮調 have been available in English translation since the nineteen seventies. At least one of the early Ming *cihua* 詞話 (“ballad story”) texts discovered in 1967 and published in 1974 has been rendered into English. But so far hardly anything is available of the many genres of verse narrative and prosimetrical narrative, and the little that is available tends to be old and hard to find. Mark Bender of Ohio State University is currently editing a large modern selection of folksong, which will include examples of verse narrative and prosimetrical narrative, but so far this collection has not yet seen the light of day.

For the tale of Meng Jiangnü I am aware of three early translations, each relatively difficult to come by, and, perhaps even more importantly for teaching purposes, difficult to read for the current generation of American students. The earliest translation of the tale of Meng Jiangnü was done by George Carter Stent. George Carter Stent was a Briton who spent most of his adult life in China, in the second half of the nineteenth century, as an employee of the Customs Service. He developed a particular liking for Chinese folksong, which he would render, like a good Victorian, into rhyming verse. His versification is not just competent, but often quite smart and witty. All together he published two collections of renditions. None of these volumes is easily located nowadays. His version of the legend of Meng Jiangnü is probably based on a text very much like the *nanci* 南詞 (“southern ballad”) version included by Lu Gong in his compilation, and may be found in his *Entombed Alive, and other songs, ballads, etc. (from the Chinese)* of 1878, as “Mêng Chêng’s Journey to the Great Wall.” Almost fifty years later, in 1934, Genevieve Wimsatt and Geoffrey Chen (Chen Sunhan) published

⁷ “Meng Jiangnü” *shi yizhu zunru fanfa did a ducao* 孟姜女是一株尊儒反法的大毒草 (Nanning: Guangxi renmin chubanshe, 1975).

their *The Lady of the Long Wall, A Ku Shih or Drum Song, translated from the Chinese*. This translation is based on a late edition of the tale as a “youth book” or *zidishu* 子弟書, simply entitled *Ku cheng* 哭城 (Weeping at the Wall), which was already printed in the eighteenth century. This is again a rhymed translation. Both these versions of the legend are examples of verse narrative. The earliest example of a prosimetrical version among our translations is “The Ballad of Meng Jiang nu Weeping at the Great Wall (A Broadsheet from the City God’s Temple at Lanchow, Gansu),” published in 1948 in *Sinologica*. This is a relatively short version, which was put into English by Joseph Needham and Liao Hongying, who employed “William Langland’s metre” for the translation of the verse sections. Joseph Needham would of course quickly abandon the field of popular literature, and go on to write and edit *Science and Civilization in China* (1954-).

In order to present contemporary foreign students with readable translations of different versions of the legend of Meng Jiangnü, I therefore concluded I would have to do these translations myself. I ended up with a collection of ten different texts, representing different genres of *shuochang wenxue* and offering widely divergent versions of the legend. This collection will be published early next year by Washington University Press, under the title *Meng Jiangnü Brings Down the Great Wall, Ten Versions of a Chinese Legend*. The translations proper will be preceded by shortened version of the essay on the May Fourth interpretation of the legend by Haiyan Lee, which she published in early 2005 in the *Journal of Asian Studies*, and a historical survey on the development of the legend written by myself. My selection of ten versions is dictated both by practical concerns and by personal predilection. Because these ten translations all had to fit within one book, certain versions had to be excluded because they were too bulky. The earliest completely preserved prosimetrical version of the legend is a late-Ming *baojuan* 寶卷 probably would run to hundreds of pages in English renditions. The same applies to a prosimetrical version in prose interspersed with sections of ten-syllable verse, which was composed in the early years of the twentieth century and widely reprinted throughout the first five or six decades of that century,⁸ exerting a considerable influence on many “oral” versions. Among the versions of manageable size I chose those texts which I find a joy to translate. The texts I translated turned out to fall into two equal groups. The first part of my book consists of five texts which were printed in the Qing dynasty or the early-Republican period, while the second part consists of five texts which have been collected in the field in recent decades by scholars of folk literature.

The texts collected in Part I represent five different genres, which I have arranged roughly in the order of date of first know printing. In this order, the first text is a new translation of *Kucheng*, the *zidishu* text from Beijing which was earlier translated by Wimmersatt and Chen, but this time around I make no attempt at rhyming my rendition. Rather, I try to reflect in my translation one of the formal characteristics of the genre, that is, the wide variation in line length. Like all other genres of traditional Chinese verse narrative, *zidishu* uses the seven-syllable line as the basic line for its verse, but perhaps

⁸ My personal copy of this anonymous *Meng Jiangnü wanli xunfu* was printed in Hong Kong by the Kwong Chi Company, ca. 1960.

because the music of *zidishu* was very slow, many additional syllables could be inserted. This version of the legend very much focuses on the sufferings of Meng Jiangnü while traveling to the border in order to find her husband. My second text is version of the legend that is classified by Taiwanese scholars as one of the earliest preserved examples of *gezai ce* 歌仔冊 (song booklets), and which is available on Wang Shunlong's 王順隆 website for this type of materials maintained at the Academia Sinica. This text was printed at Quanzhou, and its version starts at the very beginning, with Meng Jiangnü pronouncing a vow that she will marry the first man who sees her naked body, irrespective of his status, whereupon she proceeds to take a bath in the pond. Despite its classification as a *gezai ce*, this version still shows little or no influence of Minnanese, in contrast to later rewritings of this legend as *gezaice*, which became increasingly Minnanese in their language.⁹

My third version is a rendition of a *nanci* text, originating from the Jiangnan area. For my selection I chose the *Chongbian Meng Jiangnü xunfu kudao wanli Changcheng zhenjie chuanzhuan* 重編孟姜女尋夫哭倒萬里長城貞節全賺 (The revised version of the complete story of the steadfast chastity of the Maiden Meng Jiang, who, searching for her husband, brought down the Long Wall by her weeping). This is a revision of a earlier *nanci*, which can easily be located in late-Qing and early-Republican printings. I preferred the later revision, however, because of its superior literary qualities. I have so far failed to locate a late-Qing or early-Republican edition for this text, so I had to rely on the edition provided by Lu Gong in his compilation, even though that edition omits a significant number of lines, as was pointed out almost thirty years ago by Wang Qiugui. The author of this version apparently thought it unthinkable that a proper young lady would go skinny-dipping in a garden pond without any provocation, so has her blown into the pond as she bends over to retrieve a fan she had inadvertently dropped into the water. The journey of Meng Jiangnü to the Great Wall in this version very much becomes a local trek along the Grand Canal from Suzhou to Zhenjiang. My fourth selection also originates from the Jiangnan area. This is the *Meng Jiang xiannü baojuan* 孟姜仙女寶卷 (Precious scroll of the Immortal Maiden Meng Jiang). This is the version that has our heroine been born from a gourd. This is also the version that greatly develops the theme that her husband Wan Xiliang all by himself can replace the ten thousand men that will have to be buried at the base of the wall, one for every mile, because he is surnames "Ten thousand." This text is reproduced is included in Lu Gong's compilation, but there has suffered many cuts. For my translation I could rely on an early-Republican lithographic printing bought by Professor Patrick Hanan in the nineteen-fifties and donated by him to the Harvard Yenching library. My final translation in Part I is a *xuanjiang* 宣講 (Exposition) text from Wuchang. *Xuanjiang* is a form of storytelling which evolved from the biweekly expositions of the Sacred Edict, and it is therefore fitting that in this version of the legend Meng Jiangnü is turned into a virtuous widow, who will only set out for the Wall once her mother-in-law has obligingly passed away.

⁹ Wang Shunlong, "Cong qi zhong quanben meng Jiang nü ge di ciyu wenti kan gezaice di jinhua guocheng" 從七種全本孟姜女割的詞語問題看歌仔冊的進化過程, *Taiwan wenxian* 48 no. 2 (1997): 165-177.

It is difficult to arrange texts collected in the field by date of origin, so I have arranged the text brought together in Part II by place of origin, roughly proceeding from North-West to South-East. My only prosimetrical text in this section is a precious scroll on Meng Jiangnü from westernmost Gansu, which in many aspects of its plot harkens back to the long late-Ming *baojuan* which I failed to include because of its length. This is one of the versions of the legend which feature the Qin-dynasty general Meng Tian 蒙恬 as a major character and include the plot-element of the switched dragon robes. In this retelling, Meng Tian, who is in charge of building the Wall, first promotes Meng Jiangnü's husband, but soon grows jealous of him and has done him in. When Meng Jiangnü arrives at the Wall, she takes revenge by promising Meng Tian a fine dragon robe to present to the First Emperor, but the robe turns out to be a mourning garment and the emperor has his general killed. This version also presents us with the most elaborate account of the confrontation between the virtuous widow and the lustful tyrant. This text is one of the many *baojuan* which have been collected in Western Gansu by scholars such as Duan Ping 段平, who in this case provides a detailed account of the discovery and reconstruction of the text.

For some other versions of the legend of Meng Jiangnü I relied on the volumes in the series *Zhongguo geyao jicheng* 中國歌謠集成 (China's songs and ballads). While the volumes in this series focus primarily on short and lyrical folk songs, many of them also include a small section of narrative ballads. The volume of *Zhongguo geyao jicheng* for Henan province provided me with a long ballad all in verse from Pingdingshan. This is a representative of the northern tradition of the legend, which does away with the meeting of Meng Jiangnü and her future husband at the garden pond, and turns her into a prim and proper bride. An interesting feature of this version is the large number of gods who are at times involved in the action. The volume of *Zhongguo geyao jicheng* devoted to Zhejiang province provided me with a narrative ballad from Dongtou island near Wenzhou. This version is remarkable for the motivation it provides for the building of the Great Wall. Whereas in other versions of the legend the First Emperor decides on the construction of the Great Wall because he has been told a prophecy that his dynasty will be destroyed by *hu* 胡 (which he takes to refer to the northern barbarians, but actually refers to his second son Huhai) or because he dreams of sheep swarming his country, in this version he is cursed with an incestuous passion for the empress-dowager (his mother), who agrees to become his wife if he will build a wall as high as heaven.

The last two versions of the legend I have to mention both come from Hunan province. One version hails from north-western Hunan, an area that used to have a thriving Meng Jiangnü cult. This version is said to be a Tujia 土家 song, but the Tujia are a minority which considered themselves very much Han before 1949, and the text shows little outspoken marks of a non-Han ethnic identity. I had originally translated the version included in the volume devoted to Hunan province in the *Zhongguo geyao jicheng*, which appeared in 1999, but I later discovered that the version included in the much earlier *Meng Jiangnü ziliao xuanji* of 1985 was more complete, so I based my rendition on that edition. This version, entitled *Jiangnü xia chi* 姜女下池 (Jiangnü steps into the pond) basically limits itself to an account of the meeting of our heroine and her future husband as she notices him observing her taking a bath in a secluded pond. The final version I

translated is the version in women's script from southernmost Hunan. This version was written out by Yi Nianhua 義年華, one of the last practitioners of women's script, in the nineteen eighties. This version of the legend is the only one in my selection in which Meng Jiangnü eventually returns home with her husband's bones:

Meng Jiang recovered her husband's bones,
 She carried them home and put them in her room.
 Each night she slept alongside her husband's bones,
 And never in her life did she marry another man!

Some General Questions, Conclusions, and Perspectives

While working on these materials on Meng Jiangnü, I was struck by a number of aspects. The very first of these, common knowledge to all scholars with some experience in research I trust, is the enormous variety of these different versions. While practically all versions will touch upon some core elements of the story, even such seemingly central episodes as the journey to the Great Wall or the weeping at the Wall, which in some versions are elaborated at length, may be mentioned only in a few lines in many other adaptations. While some versions develop the final confrontation between Meng Jiangnü and the First Emperor at great length, as our heroine imposes more and more outrageous demands on the lustful tyrant before she will share his couch (a promise she does not intend to keep), other versions have her honored by the First Emperor or omit his character all together. Northern versions usually omit the scene of the meeting of Meng Jiangnü and her future husband at the garden pond. Southern versions tend to retain this version in which a bathing Meng Jiangnü forces the fugitive corvée laborer who has seen her naked body to marry her. In versions from the Jiangnan area her husband is already on the run before he ever has been to the construction site of the Wall, as he has been selected as the perfect sacrificial victim on account of his name. One could go on listing such differences, and the picture would become even more complicated if one would also include the variations in dramatic adaptations, in the many varieties of regional and ritual drama that include this legend in their repertoire. To me that means that it is hardly possible to discuss "the meaning" of the legend of Meng Jiangnü. Rather, each version, as determined by period, region, and genre, has its own meaning, and each of these meanings would in my eyes be equally valid.

I have also wondered to what extent this large variety in versions is related to the long development of the tale. When reading different versions of the legend of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai there seemed to be a much smaller degree of variation between the different versions in the main body of the narrative, up to the spectacular suicide of Zhu Yingtai, when she jumps into her lover's grave. While modern retellings of the tale tend to end here, most traditional versions of the legend find a transformation into butterflies too lame an ending and bring about either a revival or a rebirth of the couple, and allow Liang Shanbo to assert his manhood by passing the examinations and defeating barbarian enemies of the empire. In the case of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, however, we have one *tanci* 彈詞 version, entitled *Da hudie* 大蝴蝶, which would appear to have been

written as a deliberate counter-account, in which all the more bawdy aspects of the other versions (such as Liang Shanbo's observation of Zhu Yingtai's exposed breasts) have been omitted, in which Zhu Yingtai on parting with Liang Shanbo does not drop numerous broad hints about her desire for marriage (let alone express a regret she never had sex with him when she had every chance), and in which both of them become paragons of virtue, resisting the advances of prostitutes and saving good girls from the clutches of lechers. Such a deliberate recasting of the whole story is difficult to identify in the case of the legend of Meng Jiangnü, even though our *xuanjiang* versions almost manages to turn our heroine into a mirror image Zhao Wuniang 趙五娘.

A second aspect I would like to highlight is the textual nature of overwhelming number of versions. Written-out versions, whether manuscripts or printed editions, are of course our only sources for knowing the earlier versions of the legend. But also in the case of versions that have been collected in more recent decades, there often exists a close connection with a written source. The *baojuan* version collected by Duan Ping in Western Gansu was a manuscript—a few pages of this manuscript were missing because they had been torn out by the owner's baby granddaughter, but as the old man knew the text by heart anyway, the full text could be reconstructed, the major problem in this effort being the owner's extremely heavy local accent. The version in women's script was by its very nature a written-out text, and it was evidently based on a songbook in standard characters which circulated locally. In the case of the Tujia version, we are told that by the editor of the text that performers told him that there used to exist manuscripts of the song. The version from Henan which I translated, based on the modern transcription of a performance, evidently goes back to an earlier ballad from Henan, which has been preserved in several nineteenth-century printing. Only for the ballad from Dongtou island I have no information on a manuscript or printed edition of the text. I do not have to remind this audience how unkind the second half of the twentieth century has been to the survival of textual materials of this kind.

Each version originates of course at a specific place and time, but as written texts they have a remarkable capacity to move from one performance tradition to another and from one place to the next. The text that originally was written as a "youthbook" or *zidishu* was later performed as a "drumsong" or *dagushu* 大鼓書. The same text that was printed in Quanzhou and has been classified as one of the earliest Minnanese *gezai ce*, was also printed in Western Fujian at Sibao, and the Sibao booksellers peddled their wares primarily to the Hakka communities in Guangdong and Guangxi. As a result, as so many performance traditions used the same textual format of ballads composed of seven-syllable lines, scholars have often been in disagreement as to the classification of these texts. Wang Qiugui has questioned Lu Gong's application of the label of *nanci* to some texts included in the latter's compilation, preferring the much more generic and unspecific designation of "ballad." (In the case of the ballad from Dongtou Island which I translated, the editors of the Zhejiang volume of the *Zhongguo geyao jicheng* characterized it as a *shange* 山歌, whereas earlier the editors of the *Meng Jiangnü ziliao xuanji* had described it as a *Wenzhou guci* 溫州鼓詞.)

If folk literature is defined as primarily orally transmitted stories and songs, then these ballads are at the margin of folk literature at best. Late-imperial China has been paradoxically described as a highly literate society with a low degree of literacy: while written texts were needed for many aspects of daily life, only somewhere between 10 to 20 percent of the population could read, and only an even smaller number could write. Even if the written versions of the legend of Meng Jiangnü were based on a living performance tradition, writing down such a version, while it may not have required an academic erudition, still must have required considerable literary skill—and many texts do indeed manifest considerable literary qualities.¹⁰ Many versions, I am convinced, will have been written with an intimate knowledge of some performance tradition but as a new item, and many of these texts will have been written for reading from the very beginning. To the extent that such text were not just read but also performed, they often will have been preformed by professionals. Both the written nature of our materials and the professional nature of performance (if any), would seem to argue for maintaining a distinction between “folk literature” (*minjian wenxue*) and “popular literature” (*suwenxue*), each more narrowly defined than has sometimes been the case in the past. My conception of *su wenxue* would be limited basically to long works of verse narrative and prosimetrical literature, along with the really popular traditional novels, such as the military romances. I very much hope that the recent publication of the *suwenxue* collection of the Fu Ssu-nien Library by the Xinwengeng Company in Taipei will stimulate the study of these unique materials, also as works of literature.¹¹

It is interesting in this respect also to consider the links between *su wenxue* and the print culture of late-imperial China and the early-Republican period. Most studies of printing and book culture so far have very understandably been focused on the upper end of the industry: the publishing activities of the court, the publishers that catered to the needs of the elite literati, and the religious publishing activities. Cynthia Brokaw, who has focused on the much less well-documented lower end of the industry, has made a compelling argument that the Qing dynasty witnessed a large expansion of printing activities at the lower end of the spectrum. In her recently published *Commerce in Culture: The Sibao Book Trade in the Qing and Republican Period* she has focused on the business practices and the output of the publishers of Sibao in Western Fujian.¹² She argues that the publishers of Sibao primarily targeted the lowest stratum of the literate, book-buying public, and proceeds to sketch a “popular textual culture” on the basis of the production of these publishers, whose products often were sold by book peddlers. She divides the production of the Sibao publishers in three broad categories. The first of these consists of “educational works.” This category comprises textbooks for primary education and for examination preparation up to the lowest level. Her second category consists of “guides to good manners, good health, and good fortune.” Books in this category are mostly short guides to ritual and medicine, geomancy and fortune telling, and allow its owners, if they

¹⁰ The 1975 authors of “*Meng Jiangnü*” *shi yizhu zunru fanfa d i da ducao* squarely blamed *wenren* 文人 (literati) for the “feudal” nature of the narrative.

¹¹ The publication of the 600-volume *Suwenxue congkan* 俗文學叢刊 was started in 2001. The first 350 volumes were devoted to play scripts and other drama-related materials; the remaining volumes are devoted to *shuochang wenxue* materials. So far 500 volumes have been printed.

¹² Cambridge MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007.

are not professionals themselves, to dispense with the advice of professionals. The third category, entitled “fiction and belles-lettres,” consists primarily of military romances and talent-and-beauty novels as far as fiction is concerned, and of long verse narratives where “drama and songbooks” are concerned. It is clear from Professor Brokaw’s detailed discussion that ballads, whether verse narratives or prosimetrical texts, were published by the same publishing houses which also produced primary text books and self-help books, and were offered for sale by the same sellers to the same audience of readers with at least a basic literacy, and so functioned within a “popular textual culture” which displayed a remarkable homogeneity all over the empire. *Shuochang wenxue* led a double life, so to speak: on the one hand as a performance tradition with a widely divergent audience dependent on subject, style, format, the performer’s gender, and venue, and on the other hand as a literary tradition within the “popular textual culture” of late Imperial China.

The Sibao publishers who enjoyed certain advantages for most of the Qing dynasty, such as a cheap supply of paper and low labor costs, were in a most disadvantageous position once the modernization of the Chinese print industry entered a new phase in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and Shanghai quickly developed into the national center of Chinese print capitalism, as described by Christopher A. Reed in his *Gutenberg in Shanghai: Chinese Print Capitalism, 1876-1937*.¹³ By the early twentieth century, Shanghai had become the center of China’s modern mass literature—if up to that date many small-scale local centers had provisioned the market, now a much larger, national market was dominated by a few publishers who provided all of China with the same publications, which were uniformly imbued with the ideology of modernization and nationalism. In his monograph, Professor Reed pays ample attention to the role of the technical process of lithography in the modernization of the Chinese printing industry, and here it becomes meaningful, I believe, to point out the role of verse narrative and prosimetrical literature as the staple of many of these lithographic publishers in the twentieth century. Once new technologies made for larger print runs and lower prices for a larger audience, publishers quickly exhausted the store of old bestsellers, and new texts had to be supplied in ever larger quantity. If this happened in the field of prose fiction, it probably also happened in the field of verse narrative and prosimetrical narrative. The Shanghai lithographic publishers of the early decades of the twentieth century published ballads in a wide variety of genres in numbers never seen before, and sold their publications all over China, soon killing off regional publishing centers such as Sibao. It is impossible to determine how much of the Shanghai production was based on pre-existing texts, and how much was original, unless we have earlier manuscripts or woodblock printings. Even if the Shanghai publishers reprinted earlier works, they often sold them as *gailiang* 改良 or “improved” editions, promising their readers up-to-date modern rewritings. Much more than we usually acknowledge of so-called traditional *suwenxue* is, I’m afraid, very much a product of the early modernizing print industry.¹⁴ By broadening the reading public and increasing its reading experiences this late-Qing, early Republican *suwenxue* must have played a major but largely unrecognized role in the

¹³ Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004.

¹⁴ The rapid development of *gezai ce* in the early part of the twentieth century and the increasing Minnanese coloring of its language is not just a continuation of tradition but very much a phenomenon of the colonial modernity of Taiwan.

formation in the modern mass reading public of the twenty-twenties and beyond. Once modern education spread widely, and once the lithographic presses in their turn lost out to the huge printing factories of the Commercial Press and its competitors, however, *suwenxue* was assigned to the dustbin of history, where it soon would be joined by mandarin ducks and butterfly fiction. But whereas the latter genre has enjoyed a revival of sorts in recent decades, fate has been less kind to verse narrative and prosimetrical literature as forms of literature for reading.

This has not been so much a keynote speech as a keyhole talk. I am grateful that I have been allowed to say a few words on the topic of this conference from my very limited perspective. If I bored you, I hope at least that the drone of my voice will have allowed you to doze off pleasantly, to enjoy the most marvelous adventures in fairy-tale-like dreams of your own making.